I wish I could say all the things I could say... my favorite line from our hymnal I think. Perhaps because it’s my job to be saying things Sunday after Sunday. No matter how many times I’ve spoken in public, I always feel inadequate to the task. Words are just words, after all. They mean what we agree they mean, and no more. And they are also our biggest tool for communication, for building relationship, for being together. Many of us explored that tool a couple of weeks ago in the workshop on Non-Violent Communication.

It is great to be with you this morning. Your welcome has been enthusiastic and sincere. I want to tell you about the stole I’m wearing – (that it’s one I wore March 22, 2014 when I performed – with 2 student ministers – 17 same sex weddings when the US District Court ruled the state’s denial of marriage rights unconstitutional – I got ink on it, which is covered with this heart and the shape of the state of Michigan on top. The congregation signed their names on the back etc.) I have felt your embrace as I have adjusted to this new place, these new people, this new climate.

It seems we are all adjusting to a new climate these days. When I was here for candidating week, you all told me how unusual your winter had been – how very long and cloudy and rainy it was. How you had feet of snow when you never get snow. When I arrived in late June, we had the glorious sunny days I remember from long ago summer trips to the coast when I could have been persuaded that it was always sunny and beautiful in the Pacific Northwest.

But more recently, the mountains have disappeared from the white haze of wildfire smoke. Last Tuesday, if it hadn’t been so hot, I would have believed it was snowing with the ash blowing around. These local fires, Hurricanes Harvey and now Irma all give us painful, concrete images of how global climate change may be affecting us from here on out. As astrophysics professor Adam Frank says,

“It’s never been about politics or ideology...“What it’s always been about are the truly awesome powers inherent to planets and the real human consequences of altering the balance of those powers.”

The balance of powers has been altered in many ways since last year’s presidential election. The climate has become less welcoming – to immigrants, people of color, Muslims, those who are transgendered, or disabled or gay, well, the list, as you know, goes on and on and on. Though I cannot blame the current administration for the changes in our planet’s weather patterns, (though they are not helping) I can and do fault the current president for his hateful and hurtful rhetoric and actions which further divide the country, encouraging the most racist elements of our society to spew their vitriol and kill the innocent. Words, as I said as I began, are just words, but they do have consequences. As our best tool for communication, they should be used to help and not harm.

Rev. Jennifer Bailey is an ordained itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). She wrote an op ed piece for Krista Tippet’s show On Being, you may remember the show as Speaking of Faith. The article is called the Power of Welcome in an Age of Loneliness.
She begins with these words: “We’re living in what’s been termed “the age of loneliness”: we’re more connected than ever before, and simultaneously, more isolated. We rely on social media in place of face-to-face contact. We bemoan the deterioration of conversation as we spend more time looking down at our screens than up at the people we’re talking to. But, really, the problem is that we do not give ourselves permission to talk about the things that truly matter.”

In order to give people space and permission to talk about the things that truly matter, Jennifer Bailey and a couple of friends began the 100 days 100 dinners movement. Did you know about these? For the first 100 nights of the new administration, they launched this project where people all over the country were invited to host or attend dinners with people they knew – to encourage belonging and healing – or with people they didn’t know – to try to bridge political, ideological and identity differences. Though each conversation took a different turn, they all began with the same set of questions. The questions were each designed to elicit stories from guests about times they felt unwelcome and times they felt at ease. They began each evening with the recitation of the following poem written by her friend and colleague Mickey ScottBey Jones:

Together we will create brave space
Because there is no such thing as a “safe space”
We exist in the real world
We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.
In this space
We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world,
We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,
We call each other to more truth and love
We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.
We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.
We will not be perfect.
This space will not be perfect.
It will not always be what we wish it to be
But
It will be our brave space together,
and
We will work on it side by side.

I love this idea of “brave space.” Creating brave space is something we can all participate in together – like the deep sharing the Worship Associate have been doing in the last year as they share stories from their lives connected to the theme. What Seth told you this morning about being welcomed into a group of bluegrass musicians, even though he didn’t know the first thing about jamming. Brave space is also created when we practice Non-Violent Communication as shared by Kathy Marchant a couple of weeks ago in worship and in the well-attended workshop following worship.

Safe space, on the other hand, seems to be something we try to create for others – we try to create safe space in the classroom, in a worship service, in a chalice circle. But the truth is - there is no guarantee. As long as you’ve included some human beings in your group, we can’t guarantee that confidences will be kept or your feeling won’t be hurt by the words of another. We must try, but we must also expect – that in the real world – we will be disappointed from time to time.
And so I like changing the focus from **promising safe** space to **creating brave** space. If I am brave enough to share my truth, I might encourage others to do the same. I take responsibility for my own feelings, rather than expecting others to not hurt them.

Rev. Bailey goes on to say that: “One of our biggest sources of resilience in combating loneliness is what psychologists call “common humanity”: the degree to which you see your struggles as part of the human experience. “To feel less lonely in your stress, two things help,” writes Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal. “The first is to increase your awareness of other people’s suffering. The second is to be more open about yours.”

We exist in the real world. We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds. Welcoming the awareness of our own vulnerability, our own suffering and the suffering of others. Welcoming the knowledge that we have all caused wounds and we all carry scars. These can be hard to welcome, hard to acknowledge.

Sometimes children, who have accumulated fewer wounds over fewer years, can be better at this than more experienced – more wounded – adults.

First grader Christian Bucks was scared about a move his family was considering. They were talking about moving all the way to Germany for a job, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to. How would he make new friends? How would he fit in? Then, he heard about a thing in German elementary schools called “a buddy bench” – a bench that you can go sit on if you don’t have anyone to play with. Others who are seeking a playmate can find you on the buddy bench, or might just sit there with you. You have to display vulnerability and courage, in a school playground, to volunteer to sit on a bench that declares to the world that you have nobody to play with! I would call it a brave space. And yet, that’s what kids can do, and it can work.

Seth’s story of being shut out of a peer group on a soccer team, even being bullied, is all too common. But sometimes, kids can call out the best in each other.

I tried to see if your neighborhood school, King Elementary, has a Buddy Bench, but I didn’t see anything about it on their website. But I do know that the trend has spread in this country thanks to this first-grader, who has since turned 11.

To be a people of Welcome, requires both the receiving and giving of welcome. My first thought of welcome is about giving it – providing hospitality. Being welcoming. Scooting over in worship so that latecomers can find a seat, or sharing your hymnal with a stranger. Wearing your nametag... going over to the buddy bench to see if someone would like to join your game.

But perhaps it is the other side of welcome that needs some practice – the gracious reception of welcome, the ability to ask for help and be vulnerable, to sit on the buddy bench and expose your loneliness.

It may be that **what** we need to work on is based on how much power we have in the world. Many people who identify as Unitarian Universalist are used to having some measure of power in the world, and often struggle when they become ill or as they age, or find themselves in the less familiar territory of dependency. Maybe it’s not a power thing, but I have noticed the difficulty in UU congregations of people accepting help. We’re can be great at giving it, but accepting it seems to be a bit harder.
Two springs ago, the congregation in Lansing, MI that I served, held worship services in the gymnasium of the local Islamic Center. We had bought a school that we were remodeling into our new church building, but had already moved out of the old one. The reconstruction, you won’t be surprised to learn, took longer than expected, so the congregation was temporarily homeless. The Islamic Center offered us space for a month, no charge, and really wanted to host us. Only we in the congregation weren’t so good at accepting the hospitality of others. We were used to being the hosts, not the guests. Culturally, we came up against each other a bit. For hospitality is quite important in Islam. They wanted to be good hosts, and to do that, meant they needed to be allowed to do everything for us. They set up the chairs, and did not want our help taking them down. They brought coffee and donuts and did not want us bringing in any food. My people struggled mightily.

I got emails from congregants who told me that we weren’t being gracious because we weren’t helping them take down the chairs after worship. I tried to explain, but people have a hard time getting out of our own cultural and class frameworks. Just being recipients of welcome was surprisingly hard. In fact, I’d say that was the biggest learning for me from that time sharing space with our Muslim neighbors.

I’ve been thinking about my Muslim neighbors in Lansing, MI lately, so many are immigrants from other lands. And this neighborhood, here in Vancouver, seems also to be home many people from other parts of the world. When the Trump administration announced its decision this week to rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, I couldn’t help but think of my old friends in Lansing and the new ones I’m making here, and the families of children I taught in Wenatchee before I went into the ministry. 800,000 undocumented immigrants in this country could be affected. And maybe congress will do something, but given inaction from the past, and the track record of this administration, it’s hard to hold out much hope. Even though I know this country was taken from Native peoples and many non-white peoples were enslaved and indentured to build this country, nevertheless, with Langston Hughes, I believed we could let America be America again – let it be the dream it used to be. “America never was America to me,” he wrote, but “let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed.” I have believed in the words of Langston Hughes and the words on the statue of liberty, the mother of exiles, by poet Emma Lazarus— “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” and in the absence of that welcome, that mission, I am not sure what America is to be.

And yet, we are America, too – and if we in this congregation can figure out how to be welcoming and how to receive welcome, if we can learn to be vulnerable, practice non-violent communication, learn to go sit on the buddy bench and create brave space together... it is my conviction that we can help America be the dream the dreamers dreamed...

If you’re available, there’s an opportunity this afternoon to try – and I’m sorry I didn’t get the word out sooner, so I know many of you will already have plans, but there is Love Rally and March beginning at 1:00 this afternoon in Portland. First Unitarian Church of Portland invites you to the Answering the Call of Love Rally and March beginning at 1:00pm. Why?

At 2:00 the white nationalist group Patriot Prayer is holding a rally at the Salmon Street Fountain on the waterfront and now, apparently, in Vancouver - because of this response.

As Unitarian Universalists we denounce the hateful rhetoric and threatening behaviors of this group and others who are emboldened by them. First Unitarian Church will join the march led by a broad coalition of faith and community groups under the name Portland Stands United Against Hate. They write, “We commit
to peaceful witness. We will show up in numbers. We want the Portland area to be a sanctuary for all of us, and we affirm the power of Love. “

Answering the Call of Love rally will gather at First Unitarian Church, SW 12th and Main at 1:00pm - if you wish to march, they ask that you march alongside a buddy and bring water and snacks and wear any yellow Standing on the Side of Love shirts or scarves you may have. They promise to be nonviolent, visible and united in presence as they witness for peace. I can’t promise you safe space, but I can promise brave space.

Families and others who do not want to march, are invited to join the broader community for a family-friendly rally at First Unitarian. They have partnered with Families for Peaceful Protest, who will lead folks in songs and chants for unity, love and justice.

As the poets say, “We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been—a place half-remembered and half-envisioned....someplace where we can be free.” And it begins when “we sit together and I tell you things, silent, unborn, naked things that only my God has heard me say and you do not cluck your tongue at me or split my heart into a thousand thousand pieces....I breathe you in and I breathe you out in one luxurious and contented sigh. In sweet company, I am home at last.”

Welcome Home. Happy Homecoming. And thank you for welcoming me into your midst.

Benediction

As we celebrate homecoming this Sunday, may we have that feeling of coming home, of belonging, of giving thanks to the waves upholding us. May we create here and in the wide universe a brave space where we can be vulnerable and welcome the vulnerable, leaning over the edge in wonder. Connected, may we go out into the world to make it better.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.